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# Vision of Space Defense Posing New Challenges

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## Weapons in Space

The Controversy  
Over 'Star Wars'

First of six  
articles.



WASHINGTON, March 2 — President Reagan's vision of defensive systems to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete" is moving strategic thinking and nuclear competition toward a new era.

For Mr. Reagan's vision has done nothing less than to assault the core of nuclear philosophy, namely deterrence based on the threat of retaliation. He and his senior aides are saying that the 40 years of nuclear peace built on that threat cannot last and is, in any event, immoral.

Most experts say they think that perhaps decades of research will be required before they know with confidence whether the vision can be translated into workable technology.

### Consequences of the Vision

Yet proponents and critics alike are well aware that the vision itself, along with accelerated research programs and the attending debates, is shaking the foundations of American military policy — strategic doctrine, the shape of military spending, alliance relations and arms control.

National attention is focusing more and more sharply on the plan as the two superpowers prepare to resume arms talks in Geneva on March 12, as current research and testing proceeds apace, as Congressional debate gets under way on proposed spending for such research and more and more technical and doctrinal questions emerge.

The President's ideal is a defensive system that saves lives. But the reality could be new and more powerful offensive and defensive capacities that

could be used for a decisive nuclear first strike. Thus, the debate centers on how far the reality is from the ideal: Is the President's so-called Strategic Defense Initiative, more popularly known as "Star Wars," well conceived to save countless lives and enhance deterrence, or is it more likely to lead to an ever-more-precarious nuclear balance?

For the next five years, planned spending is about \$30 billion out of more than a trillion dollars in military budgets. When and if the program gathers momentum thereafter, it could become a dominant element of that budget.

### The Allies' Position

Publicly, American allies are supporting research. Privately, they continue to express the deepest fears that the program will bring a space arms race that will reduce or eliminate the links between American security and their own.

Administration officials assert that the Strategic Defense Initiative brought the Soviet Union back to arms talks and will lead to real reductions in offensive arms. But Soviet leaders insist they will make no such reductions until the program is reined in. And Mr. Reagan said in a recent interview that he would not limit his initiative, even if Moscow agreed to deep reductions in missiles and even if all nuclear forces were eliminated. Administration officials also say he has put aside his earlier offer to share defensive technologies with Moscow.

Publicly, the Administration says the Soviet Union already has the jump in missile defense, both in a deployed antiballistic missile system and in development of new technologies. Indeed, no one disputes that the Russians have a small ABM system around Moscow

and that the United States has not deployed a system. Privately, however, the weight of opinion in the Administration is that hard American knowledge of Soviet research in this area is negligible and that the United States leads in most if not all areas of research.

All of the agonizing decisions and judgments that will have to be made in years to come on developing and deploying a panoply of the most futuristic technologies will have to be done without ever testing them against a full-scale attack. And to fulfill their goal, as former Defense Secretary Harold Brown has written, they will have to work perfectly "the first time."

The unanswered questions now seem legion. Has the momentum for the proposed program already made it unstoppable? What, in fact, is the Soviet technical ability? How was the idea of a vast American antiballistic missile system revived when it seemed so firmly put to rest by treaty more than a decade ago? Who is behind it? Who is against it? Why? Can it ultimately be made to work? Can these defensive abilities also be used as potent offensive weapons?

What is perhaps most striking about a series of recent interviews with officials throughout the Administration is that hard questions about the program are not getting much of a hearing in the inner councils. By almost all accounts,

support for the program has become the touchstone of loyalty to the President.

In fact, whether some of these questions will be answered may depend on the purview of the debate. And that may depend on who defines its terms — the Administration or its critics in Congress and the arms control field.

Officials acknowledge that the Administration wants the vision to dominate what they see as a narrow and practical debate about research into promising technologies.

The critics want to cast the debate in the broadest possible terms now, before the program becomes enormous and politically unstoppable.

Officials and critics alike agree that some research is desirable, if only on the ground of prudence and as a check against Soviet projects.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that neither critics nor Soviet leaders who publicly argue for limits on military research have put forward a plan for monitoring work that for the most part occurs in laboratories.

Mr. Reagan opened the door to the larger debate when he unveiled his ideas on March 23, 1983. In calling on scientists to find ways to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete," he said, "My fellow Americans, tonight we are launching an effort which holds the purpose of changing the course of human history."

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